

## INFORMATION FOR ADULTS WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

# what's up?

### What's it all about?

Eating disorders are serious mental and physical health problems for teens. Young people may develop unhealthy eating habits as a way of coping with the pressures of adolescence. The development of an eating disorder involves many complex factors including personality and genetics as well as the family, social and cultural environment of the adolescent. Eating disorders are most common among adolescent girls but the number of adolescent boys affected with eating disorders is rising.

Concerns about body size and weight may begin as early as 8 years old, laying the groundwork for unhealthy eating habits with devastating consequences. Two types of eating disorders are anorexia and bulimia. Anorexia involves an intense fear of gaining weight, even though the person is underweight. Bulimia involves repeated binge eating followed by vomiting, misuse of laxatives or other behaviors to prevent weight gain.

### What are the details?

- Approximately 1 out of 100 adolescent girls develop anorexia nervosa and 2 to 5 out of every 100 adolescent girls develop bulimia.
- An estimated 10% of people with eating disorders are male.
- Among Washington students who are not overweight, about half of the girls and 1-in-7 boys in 8th, 10th and 12th grade say they are trying to lose weight.
- According to the 2002 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey, 15% to 20% of girls in 8th, 10th and 12th grade report engaging in risky dieting behavior including fasting, using diet pills or powders without a doctor's prescription, vomiting or taking laxatives to lose weight in the past month.

### Why does it matter?

- Low self-esteem, poor coping skills, childhood physical or sexual abuse and early sexual maturation may place teens at increased risk for eating disorders.
- The percentage of young people diagnosed with an eating disorder may seem low, but dangerous eating behaviors that may lead to eating disorders are much more widespread.
- Eating disorders may begin with poor eating behaviors at early ages.
- Some researchers link troublesome eating patterns to increased pressures on women by the mass media, fashion and diet industry to pursue thinness.

### Health consequences: Now and later

- Eating disorders are one of the deadliest mental illnesses.
- Short-term health consequences may include: altered growth, abnormal brain structure, decreased bone strength, delayed sexual maturation, the absence of periods in girls, infertility, hair loss, tooth loss and decay, increased infections, low blood pressure, internal organ damage, and irregular heartbeat, which may lead to heart attacks.
- Long-term consequences, even after treatment, may include: short stature, weak bones, a decrease in brain cells, increased blood pressure and cholesterol, gall bladder disease, osteoporosis, diabetes, heart disease, and certain types of cancer in adults.
- Eating disorders are also related to other risk behaviors, such as failure to meet goals for education and income, substance abuse, delinquency, unprotected sexual activity, and suicide attempts.

### What can I do?

Here are some eating disorders prevention tips adapted from Dr. Michael Levine:

- Be aware of troublesome eating behaviors that may develop into eating disorders.
- Learn about eating disorders and share what you know with teens. Help avoid mistaken attitudes about food, body shape and eating disorders.
- Discourage the idea that a particular diet, weight or body size will lead to happiness.
- Challenge the belief that thinness is great and that body fat or weight gain is horrible.
- Talk positively about the kinds of foods teens should eat. Avoid categorizing foods as “good or safe” vs. “bad or dangerous.” We all need a variety of foods.
- Talk positively about body image. Avoid making judgments based on body weight or shape. Discard the idea that body weight reflects character or value.
- Talk function over form. Encourage all family members to focus on all the positive things the body can do and discourage an emphasis on body shape and size.
- Provide teens clear messages that you value them, no matter what their size or shape.
- Be critical of the media’s messages about self-esteem and body image.
- If you think someone has an eating disorder, express your concerns in a forthright, caring manner. Gently but firmly encourage the person to seek trained professional help.
- Exercise for fun and fitness—not to burn calories—get your teen involved in life-long recreational sports such as swimming, jogging, hiking and canoeing.
- Teens learn from the way you talk about yourself and your body. Talk about yourself with respect and appreciation.

### What causes eating disorders?

The cause of eating disorders is unknown but some major risk factors include:

- Low self-esteem and feelings of helplessness.
- A history of sexual, emotional or physical abuse.
- Family history and environment that includes regular discussions about dieting and physical appearance, weight-related teasing, or involvement in a profession that emphasizes thinness.
- Personal or family history of obesity, drug abuse, or depression.

### Tools to protect teens

Certain habits and skills will promote a healthy outlook on eating and physical fitness, and help teens manage the stresses of adolescence.

- Healthy eating habits protect teens from associating shame or guilt with eating.
- Support and counseling help address mental health issues.
- Healthy involvement in sports and exercise protects teens by improving self-esteem.

**hot  
links!**

**Something Fishy** [www.somethingfishy.org](http://www.somethingfishy.org)

Information and resources pertaining to anorexia, bulimia and compulsive overeating

**The Renfrew Center Foundation** [www.renfrew.org](http://www.renfrew.org)

Eating disorders education, treatment and prevention resource

**National Women’s Health Information Center** [www.4woman.gov/BodyImage/Bodywise/bodywise.htm](http://www.4woman.gov/BodyImage/Bodywise/bodywise.htm)

Eating disorders information for school personnel, parents and teens

**Adolescent Eating Disorders** <http://faculty.washington.edu/jrees/adolescentnutrition.html>

University of Washington Maternal and Child Health Program

**National Institute of Mental Health** (301) 443-4513; [www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/eatingdisorder.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/eatingdisorder.cfm)

**Washington State Healthy Youth Survey 2002** [www3.doh.wa.gov/HYS](http://www3.doh.wa.gov/HYS)

Washington State Department of Health  
DOH Pub 910-116 11/2003  
[www.doh.wa.gov](http://www.doh.wa.gov)

Resources listed here are provided as a public service and do not imply endorsement by the State of Washington.

References for source materials are available from the Child and Adolescent Health program, 360-236-3547.

For persons with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. Please call 1-800-525-0127.



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